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The quiet lessons of Northern Ireland

By Louise Richardson | August 2, 2007

A successful counterterrorist campaign ended this week without a sound. The British Army ended its operation in Northern Ireland after 38 years. Operation Banner was the longest continuous campaign in the history of the British Army. In all, more than 300,000 British soldiers served in the province, while at the height of "The Troubles" 30,000 British troops were stationed there. The conduct of this campaign and the way it ended provide lessons to the United States today, if only we are prepared to learn them. Instead we seem intent, just like the British in Northern Ireland, on learning only from our own mistakes.

In August 1969, thousands of young Britons were dispatched to Belfast on what was expected to be a brief assignment. Ostensibly they were sent at the request of the Northern Irish government to help restore order in the wake of widespread violence occasioned by Catholic civil rights marchers and the response of Protestant mobs. On the ground, they were perceived as coming to defend the Catholic minority from the Protestant police force that had run amuck. The air of crisis was palpable. Jack Lynch, the Irish Taoiseach (prime minister), declared publicly that the Irish people could not stand by and watch their co-religionists brutalized. He called on the United Nations to intervene.

The arrival of the troops was welcomed by Catholics, who treated patrolling soldiers to cups of tea. It didn't take long for this to change. When troops are deployed in a civilian setting they behave as soldiers do, roughly. Trained to repel Soviet tanks on the plains of Bavaria, they had no desire to separate Catholics and Protestants on the backstreets of Belfast. Meanwhile Irish republicans were happy to be fighting the traditional enemy, the army, rather than Protestant neighbors.

The army proved to be an enormously powerful recruitment tool for the IRA. In fact, the Provisional IRA wasn't even formed until six months after the arrival of the troops. When an army is deployed to restore order in a divided society, inevitably the army sides with the forces of law and order but these forces are often a party to the conflict. At the behest of the local authorities, the British army rounded up Catholic suspects for interrogation and internment without trial. The real trouble-makers, with far better local intelligence than the army, had slipped away, leaving others to be radicalized by the experience. When in January 1972 British paratroopers opened fire on unarmed civil rights marchers, killing 14 in full view of the television cameras, the moral authority of the British Army was destroyed in the eyes of the Catholic community. It has still not recovered.

Why is it that 30,000 of the best and most professionally trained soldiers in the world, operating close to home in a place where they spoke the language, could not defeat a few hundred largely untrained members of the IRA? Largely because of the complicit support the IRA received from the Catholic community in Northern Ireland, in the Irish republic and even, for a time, in the United States. These people did not support the brutal means employed by the IRA but they did not trust or respect the authorities enough to help them.

As is often the case, the military was the first to see the writing on the wall. In 1978 General Glover, the commander of land forces in the province, wrote a secret intelligence estimate in which he disputed the government's position that the members of the IRA were thugs and hooligans and concluded that the British could never defeat the IRA militarily: "The Provisionals' campaign of violence is likely to continue while the British remain in Northern Ireland." It was a very unpopular but keenly prescient document.

The achievement of the British military was to fight the IRA to a stalemate in order to make space for politics. This week, General Nick Parker, the head of the army in Northern Ireland, rightly said that the military's achievement was to make "a significant contribution to the security in Northern Ireland that has allowed other people to make the difference through politics, social programs, and economics."

The role of politics is evident in the silence that has greeted the end of Operation Banner. Nobody does military ceremonies like the British. But this week there were no bugles playing, no ceremonial striking of the Union Jack, no mention of the 763 British soldiers who died in Northern Ireland. In the zero sum calculus that is the hallmark of divided societies, this ceremony might be perceived as a loss for the loyalist population of Ulster, so it did not happen. The government of Gordon Brown made no effort to exploit this event for political advantage just as Tony Blair refused to exploit the decommissioning of the IRA's arsenal two years ago. There was no hint then of triumphalism, no talk of victory, because that would appear as a loss for the republican community. Partisan politics took a back seat to political progress.

One of the iron laws of counterterrorism is that democratic governments get better at it. One of the many tragedies of the past six years is our refusal to learn from the mistakes of others and to insist instead on learning only from our own. There remains much that we can learn from others and in particular from others who have tried to rely on the military to defeat terrorism. In order to do so, we must get over our questionable conviction that we are so uniquely and exceptionally good and our adversaries so uniquely and irredeemably bad that the only experience that matters is our own.

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